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AUTHOR Duckler, Marvin
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ABSTRACT

Given that public television must often resort to "talking faces" to fill time (because discussion programs are so cheap to produce), consideration needs to be given to how to do this in audience-attracting ways. One particularly useful method is to pattern the discussion on the enduring human ritual of the sacrifice: with the audience as communicants represented by questioners, some highly placed sacrificial victim is called upon to answer for all the inadquacies of present conditions. (RH)

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# TALKING FACES, EATING TIME, AND ELECTRONIC CATHARSIS

Marvin Duckler

National Center for Experiments in Television
288 Seventh Street
San Francisco, California 94103

Presented at the Conference on Television: Art and Information

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Talking Faces, Eating Time, and Electronic Catharsis

Marvin Duckler

Carefree as these two days have been, there is a need to inject a note of seriousness into our meetings. Documentaries and dramas are fascinating and have helped us to explore image, reality, authenticity, truth and illusion. But most public television broadcasters have to deal with talk shows. Vibrations have often reached me, from you, that there be a National Center for Experiments in Talk Shows.

The talk show is the soup in which we all swim, the great fish Leviathan which feeds us all. It is the meat and potatoes of public television, and the dessert.

The great documentaries, dramas, and other miraculous flashes of culture which emanate from near-mythic centers like London, New York, Los Angeles, Boston, and, yes, San Francisco,

are the rare feasts on special Holy Days. Like Christmas and April Fool's Day, we look forward to them, but they occur rarely, each year. For the rest of the scheduled time, we dine on Talking Faces, or, I should say, the Talking Faces do the dining. As we all know, Talking Faces eat time.

Eating time, or rather, filling the air with respectable, inexpensive broadcast material may not make the public tele vision broadcaster happy, but it surely permits him to sleep nights. The task of the National Center for Experiments in Talk Shows would be to explore the means whereby talk programs could be made significant, meaningful, exciting, cheap, easy to produce, and non-controversial.

Though such a Center does not exist at present, some thought has been given to the question. Of course, appropriate funding for this kind of thinking would be welcome, but on occasion, we all do some un-funded thinking. This has been identified as unfounded thinking, or confounded thinking, but only by reprehensible bureaucrats who have nothing better to do with their time.

These positive thoughts about Talking Faces and the Eating of Time potentially may offer a new religious experience, and lead to what shall now be described as Electronic Catharsis.

With Dr. McLuhan as one of our authorities, and many hours of assiduous and scholarly research in front of televised pro

football and weekday afternoon quiz shows, it is demonstrably apparent that the television viewing experience is a participatory experience. If you have ever, as have I, been tackled below the knees by two four hundred pound behemoths on a Sunday afternoon, while swallowing beer, you too would say, "Ooof!" and spray foam all over the face of the tube. If you have ever, as have I, known the capital of Peru, while the nincompoop facing the quizmaster stared blankly at the lens, you too would have shouted, "Lima, you ass!" at the deaf, cyclopic monster in front of you. Imagine! Talking to a piece of glass! But there you are. We are participants during the television viewing experience.

Television's most meaningful participation arrangements are in a 'game' context. If, in regarding a television broadcast, we have no opportunity to seek a winner, or empathize with a loser, then we darken the tube. A no-win, no-lose broadcast is a soporific. We could forestall the national energy crisis and save electricity by acting upon this realization. A candle flame, or a twirling bead is more appropriate to the insomniac. What a paradox it is to condider that dialectical exchange is so absolutely essential in the television experience, and yet, television 'makers' are neither aware of this, nor do they plan for it. For a completed event, the viewer MUST participate in the television experience, but,

because of the "tele" part of television the distance in space and time between orgination and reception is usually immense. We are faced with a paradox whose only solution can be a ritual solution.

Those on either side of the television tube are assigned roles in a process whose ritualistic schema is understood by all, planned for by all, and fulfilled by all concerned. A ritual dialectic is an infallible solution, and as noted, has worked. Since the style of our time is an informal one, the 'game' is the most often utilized method of resolving the described paradox. It is good to remember that there is nothing informal about the game itself, only its accoutrements.

Any game may be examined as ritual. Game activity is invariably ritual re-enactment, be it hide-and-seek, chess, or armored regiments pounding each other into a chalk striped field, battling over a magic-laden ovoid, the possession of which, mystically, brings untold riches and honors.

Games as ritual is one step upward in the sophisticated supplanting of the Real Thing when that Real Thing becomes too dangerous, or uncomfortable. Religion, which has so much to do with life and death, very early in history had no substitute ritual for reality. LIFE proved rather difficult to evoke, and DEATH was both unattractive and uneconomical. The problem with ritual, however, is that man's sense of reality

is so strong that unless the schema is ingenious (and there is no schema that is ABSOLUTELY ingenious) man sees into the attempted illusion, and, to celebrate the discovered "in-sight", he mocks the charade. From these glorious moments of self-analysis and self-discovery are born games, which are, self-evidnetly, playful, or laugh forms of more serious rituals, which are, in THEIR turn, serious efforts at creating the illusion of weighty acts of life and death. These win-lose, life-death game affairs have taken on any number of forms, not the least of which have been those plays -- note the word, 'plays' -- of the Greek theater.

The Talking Face broadcast is more like Greek theater than any other kind of contemporary theater. Let us align the two. There are Questioners and there are Answerers, in both. There is a hidden body of knowledge which the Questioners seek out and which the Answerers are either concealing or are ignorant of. In either case, there is a frustration of objective, and a tension is built up. There may be, variously, dramatic irony, sarcasm, defensive fury, cold and heartless attack. Lawrence Spivak, Leader of the Greek Chorus during the weekly life/death, or sacrificial ritual called Face the Nation, sets the tone and lends the form to the stately passions of the remainder of his Chorus of Fourth Estaters. These Fourth Estaters, on television,

are as close as possible to being true surrogates for an audience. They ask questions, and they react to answers. They are involved in a liturgy which, in its most successful moments, as in Greek drama, enables the audience to BECOME them, and the audience sways with them, moves, thinks, feels, asks, reacts, and totally IDENTIFIES, with them. The audience, as in a religious-mystical experience, IS the chorus, is the mass of congregants, IS experiencing an ancient, prehistoric, sacrificial rite that through eons of time became formalized and more acceptable to the delicate sensibilities of civilized man, via theater and choruses and players.

Now, keep in mind, sacrifice is not the cruel, heartless, sadistic ritual it appears to be. In very, very olden times, even the victim was not totally uncooperative. Oh, he squirmed a little bit during crucial moments, but he usually made his way to the altar with great eclat. And the victim, of course, was most often a chief of king! What better offering could be made to the gods, by a community, than its king -- a really valuable, a TOP piece of merchandise! That was the case for a long while until certain more sophisticated approaches to the problem were conceived of by those who were troubled by a constant depletion of leadership. Substitutes, or surrogates were devised for the king. Initially, human substitutes were offered in place of the king, since the king and his friends

and relatives were developing some uncertainties about the whole process. Later on, all humans, generally, felt uncomfortable about it -- they couldn't put their finger on the problem -- it vaguely had something to do with image and reality -- they knew <u>that</u> -- but they also KNEW in their bones that they had best continue the ceremony in SOME fashion, because the welfare and prosperity of their whole society depended upon it -- heavens knows what the gods would have done to them without some kind of propitiation. They found animals were excellent substitutes. They had tried it hesitantly, at first, and IT WORKED! Seemed to work best with GOATS, too, smelly, ecologically obtuse little pests! Come to think of it, put a crown on the hairy little uglies, and they DID look like the old king! Goats it was, and goats it has been, since! Sometimes cows and sheep, but mostly goats. The animals discomfort about the arrangement was, of course, discountable. And they were excellent protein nourishment.

With this move toward surrogation so pleasantly worked out, the communicants at the rites, some of whom were squeamish about blood letting, or perhaps had intellectual reservations about what seemed to them a charade, also found surrogates. The whole matter became profoundly ritualized. Ultimately, in Greek theater, we find Greek royalty being impersonated by actors and Greek populaces being represented by the Chorus,

and seated around the steep hilside, eating oranges and olives and drinking good retsina, the audience enjoyed observing the ancient ritual, decked out in all kinds of disguises, but transparent enough to afford them a satisfaction of that old need of theirs to relieve their inner tensions about a frowning god. The surrogate ritual worked. Matter of fact, it still works. But it has got to be done right. Which brings us to our thesis concerning Electronic Catharsis.

That microsecond between pre-history and the present, though great to our diminutive human senses, is really insignificant by cosmic, or geologic, or even zoologic measures of time. It would seem, therefore, that we are still in need of that propitiatory act -- that offering up of royalty as a sacrifice to placate some troubled or troubling god -- accompanied by variously magical chantings and dancings that both awaken and intrigue the slumbering, fierce diety. If the act is successful, catharsis is the result -- an immense relief that the difficult and somewhat distasteful act has been accomplished, and that we are all the better for it.

For Electronic Catharsis, it is necessary to master and completely grasp the ancient sacrificial ritual, its development, modifications, and its atavistic re-emergence as the form and structure which public television has been struggling with

for some time. Television as image is surrogate par excellence, and our primitive efforts today, and our present stumbling researches may lead to transcendental heights never dreamed of by Aristotle or David Sarnoff.

Out of direct contact with ritual at an altar, out of direct sense experience in a theater, and faced with a glass screen only, surrogation techniques for the rite must be exquisitely and sophisticatedly thought out and exercised. Reviewing the generalized form of the Talking Face broadcast -- isn't it miraculous how those Talking Face closeups sometimes resemble Greek theater masks -- we have a host, or moderator, or interviewer, sometimes accompanied by cohorts, and he is the Leader of the Chorus, and they are the Chorus and the Chorus is surrogate for us. We have a guest or guests, or panelists, that are, hopefully, of some stature in a community, thus surrogating for Royalty, Leadership, or the Victim to be sacrificed to the never-satiable god. And then, we have the rite.

Now, if we assume that the Talking Faces broadcast is, truly, a metaphor for the ancient (and psychologically necessary) rite of sacrifice -- necessary by virtue of the historic development of the human psycho-social animal -- then any deviation from the historic norm, the traditional structure of sacrificial ritual, is uncountenanceable. The audience (communicant) feels cheated, regards the affair as a big bungle,

expects the unpropitiated god to blast the whole mess with heavenly fire. And they disassociate themselves from the abomination, and there is no talk show, there is only a flapping turkey.

I mentioned briefly, a moment ago, the felt need for dancing and chanting on the part of primitives, so that the god may be properly attracted and prepared for the sacrifice and its acceptance. The chanting and dancing has over the course of time, developed into an effective method of skewing reality, and it helps suspend disbelief in the process of transformation, from observing ritual to experiencing reality.

Also, in moving from significant moment to significant moment during any ritual, effective transitional techniques need to have been worked out. Now, ritual, though part of the life process, is not Itself LIFE. It is an image of life, and as such, a very utilitarian one, serving the previously described purpose. LIFE itself, we should note, does not NEED transitions, or transitional devices. It is, Itself, TRANSITION. The effective Talking Face broadcast, therefore, being a ritual, with prescribed and discrete events, actors and objectives, requires transitional methodology. Without this, it becomes formless, and non-functional. Isolation and sharply defined presentation of the Events, therefore, is essential.

Each step in the rite must be clear, and clearly presented. Talk Show transitional methodology, amazingly enough, and in keeping with the historic economy of artful ritual, is also a transformer of reality. Thus, as we are comfortably moved from Event to Event, transitions, like the light touch needed to maintain the rolling of a hoop, skew us again and again into our state of ritual consciousness.

To achieve Electronic Catharsis, therefore, a television broadcast must have sacrifice, must have royalty as sacrificial victim (or at least somebody important), must have communicants --- or beneficiaries of the act of sacrifice, and it must have some method for skewing reality, and for effecting transitions between ritual events. You have, here, the foolproof formula for effective and winning broadcast spectrum competition with the most expensive presentation that Chevrolet or General Foods has to offer. The commercial folks may be able to offer you glimpses and glances at the gods and goddesses. But you have got the secret of real-life blood and guts viewer-magnetics. You can now design with success, an honest to goodness act of sacrifice for them, "on the air".

And what is an unsuccessful talk show? One in which the maker is not aware, consciously or unconsciously, of the foregoing blueprint, and one in which ritual sacrifice is not carried out with care and precision in every detail.

All of this is not to suggest that talking in front of cameras and microphones cannot take place in any other fashion than that described. Of course, such talk has happened, and will continue to happen. What is suggested, however, is that the efforts invested in such an alternative method of presenting Talking Faces may be in vain. The television screen is today's iconostasis. Look just the other side of the screen surface and you will be sure to find all the icons man has taken the trouble to fashion during his very short history.

In closing, let me make this perfectly clear --- let there be no mistaken impression in your mind --- the sacrificial victim of your talk show, be he mayor, college president, school superintendent or fire chief, needs be guilty of absolutely nothing. In fact, the purer and more ethical he is, the more successful the sacrificial ritual will be. We are, in the ritual, attempting to resolve the unresolvable. The crime which has been committed, the offense against the gods which is to be expatiated MUST be vague, indefinable, not even MENATIONABLE. Only the results of the crime must be apparent --- communal malaise of some sort, breakdown, failure, the usual time-honored problems of society which are never solved and seem to be fused and fugued to any civilized social structure conceivable. In other words, the problem is really a social

problem, but we obtain relief from it by focusing responsibility upon the individual. That is what ritual sacrifice was about, what Greek theater was about, and it should be, with immense success, what Talking Face shows are about.

There probably remains in your minds the question about the possibility of imparting INFORMATION of any nature, and at any level, as a result of a television Talking Face broadcast. But that is not the question which I addressed myself to. It is rather the question I leave you with.

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